
Weekly Torah Portion: Mishpatim (Exodus 21-24)

Jews Need Sensitive Barometers

And these are the ordinances that you will place before them. (ibid. 21:1)

A sizeable quantity of this week's Torah portion deals with the laws of theft and damage. The question asked by many commentators is, what significance was there in giving specifically these laws immediately after the Ten Commandments and revelation at Sinai (last week's Torah portion)? By making this the first part of the Torah to be taught to the people, G-d was giving them a message. Being Jewish isn't just a spiritual experience; it's a complete system with guidelines and instructions on how to live our daily lives with our neighbors, in business, and the society in which we live. A life of seclusion in monasteries, the Himalayas, or anywhere else has never been part of the Jewish tradition. The Almighty created the world so that it would be inhabited and along with that go the challenges of creating a structure for villages and cities that allow their inhabitants to live in a safe environment and to be treated with dignity. One can talk about spirituality all day long but if you aren't painfully honest with your business dealings, your interactions with neighbors, and all other interpersonal relationships, in Jewish consciousness that person is not called spiritual. Anyone can feel spiritual but to maintain that sentiment when you stand to gain financially at someone else's expense, even if that person is much wealthier than you, is one of life's challenges. Indeed, the Talmud (Bava Batra 165a) states that most people are guilty of theft. Many say, I never steal; it's wrong, but they might not have a moral barometer sensitive enough to detect when they commit this crime. Here are a few examples.

When we lived in Israel, some relatives visiting from abroad took our family out to dinner at their hotel. One of my relatives asked me, "why don't you take some salad from the salad bar?" I said, "It doesn't come with my dinner." Her response was, "It comes with my dinner and I just took a little; that really doesn't count. You and the kids can take as much as you want because it comes with my dinner." I didn't say anything (we didn't take her offer) and I'm sure she didn't perceive taking from the salad bar as stealing but unless the restaurant grants permission, it's called stealing. Taking pens or a few office supplies from the corporation is also called stealing (even if "nobody is going to miss it," the line we hear so often), and so too is surfing the Internet or posting on Facebook when one is being paid by the hour. This is the meaning of the Talmud's axiom that most people are guilty of theft. In Judaism, integrity

in one's monetary dealings is a crucial element in being spiritual.

I was once giving a class in Jerusalem to college students on summer break; we were studying a section of the Talmud dealing with an employee's obligations to his/her employer. We discussed (what I thought was) an obvious case of theft in which the payroll department accidentally gave you two paychecks; you have to return one. One student, I can only describe him as a gentle and sensitive soul, asked, "what if you are working for a company that pollutes the water with their waste?" I answered, "You obviously don't think it's immoral to work for a company that pollutes, why should it be permitted to steal from them?" As mentioned, he was truly a sensitive person who even seemed to be concerned for the environment but when it came to his vested interest of getting money, not only did his barometer fail to detect stealing, it even seemed to convince him that it was a Mitzvah because of the company's lack of morality with respect to natural resources.

There's another lesson to be learned from juxtaposition of the Ten Commandments/Revelation at Sinai and the laws of stealing. The ultimate cause of theft is that one doesn't really believe that G-d will give him/her all that (s)he needs. It goes without saying that you have to be aggressive in finding a job and do your part by working as intelligently and as hard as you can but ultimately when one understands that G-d is running the show and gives each individual what (s)he needs, (s)he will realize that it's doesn't make sense to steal. Imagine a company that allows its employees to each lunch for free in the cafeteria every day. It wouldn't make sense for someone to break into the kitchen and steal lunch; the only reason (s)he might do so is because (s)he thinks (s)he won't get lunch and is therefore taking the matter into his/her own hands. Only a fool would risk everything to steal a lunch that (s)he can get for free. So, too, with G-d; if you steal in order to get money, what does that say about your relationship with-and specifically trust in-G-d?

Throughout life many people look for ways of making prayer meaningful, living a spiritual life, connecting to G-d, and other lofty endeavors. In Jewish consciousness we say that being honest in your interpersonal dealings with others is the bedrock of all of the above. If you're not having an honest relationship with the people in your world, you're not having an honest relationship with G-d either.

Our vested interests and desire to own things erode our "barometers" to the point that they lose their ability give us an accurate (ethical) gauge. How does one check his/her barometer? Ahh, that is the domain and beauty of Torah study.

Good Shabbos